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ABSTRACT

Much progress has been made in the quest for better rural schools. In 1977, People United for Rural Education (PURE) began its work as an advocate for rural education and small schools. In 1979, PURE was notified that it was to receive the National Volunteer Activist Award. In 1980, the Rural/Regional Education Association became the Rural Education Association and expanded its goal to improve educational opportunities for rural children with additional attention to those who had previously been most severely limited. President Carter's Small Community and Rural Development Policy (1980) reflected a major change in both the programs and the attitudes of the federal government regarding problems in rural areas. That policy translated generalized concerns about rural problems into a set of specific goals, principles, programs, and mechanisms for effective implementation. The Regulation Flexibility Act (1980) called for a complete federal review of all rules and regulations to establish their effect on small and rural schools. In October 1980, $10 million was budgeted for a rural education initiative for 1982 intended to: provide technical assistance to rural areas in the form of Rural Outreach Services: establish a Network for Communication: make more funds available for locally initiated rural education research: fund in a data base in Washington, D.C. and provide increased support to the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools: establish a Model for Rural Services: and identify and validate successful rural programs and set up an information diffusion network. (CM)

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THE QUEST FOR BETTER RURAL SCHOOLS

James D. Jess, Ed.D. (Latimer, Iowa)
Rural and Small School Conference
Kansas State University (Manhatton, Kansas)
November 11, 1980

When Jerry asked me to speak at your luncheon, I said I would; but on one condition. The condition being that I limit my remarks to twenty minutes. I did that for two reasons. First, I know how difficult it is to sit for more than twenty minutes after eating a good meal and drinking several cups of coffee without the urge to hit the comfort station and second, I'm learning how difficult it is to be the one who gets up to speak for more than 20 minutes after such an event for the very same reason. I do appreciate the opportunity of being invited back to Kansas State for the Second Annual KSU Rural and Small School Conference. Your conference coordinators, Jerry Bailey and Bob Scott, did one heck of a job lining up two days of excellent program topics and presenters. I've attended alot of rural and small school conferences during the last four years and I congratulate both Jerry and Bob for putting together one of the more meaningful meetings that I've yet attended. When I received my conference program agenda a few weeks ago and saw names like Mary Gereau, Paul Nachtigal, Ivan Muse, Harold Blackburn, Ev Eddington, Tom Schultz and my Iowa colleague, Roger Baskerville, on the program, I knew the conference would have to be a good one. A good one because these are many of the people who were responsible for helping to draw national attention to the important issues and problems of rural education. I have had the opportunity to work or visit with all of these individuals at one time or another and I can attest to the hard work and sincere effort that they have given to helping make rural education an emerging priority in American education today. Something else that makes this return trip to Kansas special for me is the fact that this is not one of those gatherings of born again country folks like so many rural education meetings are turning out to be today because of the renewed national interest in rural education. Instead, you are a group whose interest and work in rural education

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dates back many years. It's no secret that ruralism and small schools have been re-discovered in America and that the interest in both have taken on new meaning for politicians, bureaucrats and professional authorities. This re-discovery of ruralism and the value of small schools has suddenly brought out of the woodwork and closets a number of befuddled bureaucrats, researchers and nostalgic educators who, a short time ago, would not have given rural education a second glace; but who now profess to be country cousins, enlightened advocates and old authorities of rural education. Don't take me wrong, I am grateful for any attention that anyone gives to rural and small schools.

It's interesting though for me to look back only a few years to appreciate the progress that has been made with regard to the quest for better rural schools. If I may, I would like to relate to you just a couple interesting experiences that I have had that will illustrate the point I want to make.

It was in June 1977 that People United for Rural Education officially organized itself and began its work as an advocate for rural education and small schools. My motivation for helping to organize P.U.R.E. was based on the fact that I simply could not find any other group or organization at that time that was willing to assume an advocacy role for rural and small schools. The professional organizations in which I held membership were caught up in the problems and concerns of urban education and large schools, as were the other state and national organizations that represented my school board, teachers, and parents. For that matter, I couldn't find a sympathetic ear within the staff of our own State Department of Education, let alone find very many eager listeners in either of the houses of our State Legislature. So, when the idea for P.U.R.E. was conceived, I was ready to help put the idea into motion. Those of us who were original founders in P.U.R.E. understood from the beginning that the success of P.U.R.E.'s goals would depend, in part, upon the coalitions that our organization would form in the years ahead.

In August of 1977 I received an invitation to attend the Rural/Regional Education Association Conference in Colorado Springs. I had never heard of the organization before; but because it had the word "Rural" in its title and because P.U.R.E. was looking for other organizations that were working on rural education issues, I decided to attend their conference in hopes of finding some answers to the concerns we were having. Much to my surprise, the 300 or so participants at that conference were mostly regional or county administrators and the programs on their agenda had little to do with the problems I was having in trying to keep a small rural school running. As a matter of fact, there was alot of informal talk about the need for more school consolidations and I was beginning to wonder why I, a small school administrator and one who had just helped mobilize an organization to combat further involuntary state reorganization, had wasted my time and money to go to the conference. At one of the social receptions during the conference, I was told by a past president of the R/REA that the P.U.R.E. organization would be the ruin of education in Iowa because of the strong stand we were taking against rural school consolidation and the fact that the organization was drawing much of its support from what he called radical lay citizens. The kind who knew nothing about education and were only interested in their selfish motives of keeping schools open in their small, dying country towns. Needless to say, I was becoming more and more frustrated all the time. About that time there was an announcement that a meeting not scheduled on the regular program was being called for anyone interested in discussing specific problems of small rural schools. I couldn't wait to get to that meeting. When I got there, I saw a room that could have easily held a hundred or more people; but instead, there sat Ivan Muse, Ev Eddington, Paul Nachtigal and six other people. That, my friends, was the extend of the R/REA interest in rural and small school problems back in 1977. Fortunately, that situation has since changed.

In October 1980 the Rural/Regional Education Association voted at its annual conference in Portland to change its name to the Rural Education Association. It was also voted to expand the organization's goal. Their expanded goal reads:

"To further the improvement of Educational Opportunities for all children in rural areas with additional attention to those for whom opportunities have been most severely limited in the past. This Goal," the organization says, "will be accomplished by:

1. Promoting state and regional delivery systems which bring about efficient and effective education for children in rural areas.
2. Serving as the national advocate and representative for rural education.
3. Stimulating discussion, research and policy development regarding equal educational opportunities for such severely affected rural youth as migrants, Native Americans and those living in rural poverty.
4. Providing coordination, at the national level, for rural education programs and activities.
5. Brokering assistance of appropriate agencies and individuals to meet the needs of small schools.
6. Encouraging colleges and universities to develop materials and resources specifically for rural schools and to train school personnel to work more effectively in small schools.
7. Encouraging the collection and dissemination of promising practices, statistical data, and other appropriate information relating to rural education as well as the sharing of services and resources among educational organizations and agencies.
8. Providing leadership for rural education related conferences and workshops.
9. Providing a forum for all those involved in public education in rural areas -- including teachers, administrators, board members, and members of the rural community at large whereby they may come together professionally and exchange ideas.
10. Stressing the need for public and private agencies to develop specific educational materials and technology appropriate to children in rural areas."

I am proud to be able to say that in October I became a newly elected member on the Board of Directors of the re-structured Rural Education Association. I accepted a nomination for the Board because I feel the organization now has its act together and it deserves the broad base support of the rural community throughout America.

Let me turn your attention now to another interesting experience I have had. This one illustrates the changing attitudes in Washington with regard to the quest for better rural schools. In March 1978 P.U.R.E. was notified that it was the recipient of the National Volunteer Activist Award. Here was P.U.R.E., not yet a year old and the work its volunteers were doing in Iowa was about to be given national recognition. In April Janet Kinney, P.U.R.E.'s executive secretary, and I were elected to represent the organization during a week of all expense paid recognition activities in New York and D.C. and at the awards' ceremony held in the Grand Hall in the Building of the States. During that week we dined at the Plaza in New York. We had a social reception with Mayor Koch. We had dinner with Governor and Mrs. Romney. We had breakfast at the White House. Our home away from home was at the Watergate Hotel. We were interviewed by the Associated Press. Let me tell you--for two hicks from the sticks, Janet and I were experiencing New York and Washington, D.C., like only a few people are able to experience it. I don't think I need tell you that we were starting to feel kind of important and proud of our accomplihsments in P.U.R.E. Janet and I also thought that we should take advantage of our being in Washington and take off some time to visit with our Congressman and Senators. Which we did and they were all very gracious. One of the Senators also acknowledged our being there by making a statement about our award in the Congressional Record. On the morning of the day we were to leave Washington arrangements were made for us to visit with then Commissioner of Education, Dr. Ernest Boyer. When we finally arrived at Dr. Boyer's office after

getting lost several times in the bureaucratic maze in the Office of Education buildings, we were informed that he had been called to the "Hill," a phrase we later learned meant that he had been called to Congress or to the White House. So instead of visiting with the Commissioner of Education, we were invited to visit with one of his assistants who, out of respect for what is happening in Washington today, I will not mention by name. He invited us into his office and asked us what we wanted. With all that had been happening to Janet and me that week, we decided we would lay our cards on the table so we proceeded to tell the assistant commissioner why we were in Washington. We told him that we had won this national award and the reason that we had won it was because we were actively advocating the preservation of the rural school. Something that we felt was a symbol and focus of self-sufficiency and local control in a rural community. We went on to tell him that throughout rural America our old values and traditional ways of life were being threatened--or ignored by an increasingly urban society. We told him that our organization was working to combat this erosion of our way of life by trying to communicate rural values, explore the future of rural America and seek ways to preserve the basic nature and integrity of our rural way of life. And then we looked at him and said -- "and you folks here in the Office of Education aren't doing much to help us." He then turned to us with a look of disbelief and said, "I don't believe you understand the virtures of rural school consolidation and the many advantages that your rural children will have if they are able to enjoy the benefits of a larger, more sophisticated school system. I really think that when you return home you should sit back and allow the system to work." He then proceeded to tell us that we shouldn't be so cirtical of the work being done by state and federal agencies because their job was to see that equal educational opportunities were made available to all children and that especially in our cities, schools were being faced with a multiplicity of problems that needed their attention. About that time I could see the fire starting to boil in Janet's

body. She stood up, looked him straight in the eye and said, "What you are saying is all well and good from where you see education in Washington, but in the meantime who in the hell is looking out for the welfare of my kid out in the country!" With that remark, he looked at his appointment calendar which indicated our time was up and wished us a safe trip back to Iowa. It was after that experience in Washington that we made our contact with Mary Gereau who you had the pleasure of listening to yesterday when she discussed the "new awakening of rural education." With someone like Mary on our side, we found we had a spirited watchdog in Washington and one who was able to effectively rattle a few well-entrenched cages. Fortunately again, this has changed since our initial trip to Washington in early 1978.

The Carter Administration's Small Community and Rural Development Policy enacted by Congress this summer was an important step toward our quest for better rural schools because it reflects a major change in both the programs and the attitudes of the federal government as it seeks solutions to problems in rural areas. That policy translates generalized concerns about rural problems into a set of specific goals, principals, programs and mechanisms for effective implementation. It was built on the recognition that rural Americans have extraordinary creativity, dedication and perserverance and that the role of the federal government should be to encourage and support the resources and resourcefulness of rural America and be a partner to its local leaders.

In September, Congress passed the Regulation Flexibility Act which calls for a complete federal review of all rules and regulations to see what affect they have on small and rural schools. And in October, at the Rural/Regional Education Association Conference, Norm Hearn announced that $10 million, which is a start, has been budgeted for a rural education initiative for 1982. The funds are to be used to: (1) Provide technical assistance to isolated rural areas in the form of Rural Outreach Services. Funds will be made available to create an office of

Rural Education in each State Department of Education. (2) Establish a Network for Communication. Travel funds will be made available to rural educators to enable them to communicate their concerns, as well as give their input to the new Department of Education. (3) Make more funds available to support locally initiated rural education research. (4) Fund a Data Base in Washington, D.C. and provide increased support to the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. (5) Help establish a Model for Rural Services similar to the present Agriculture Extension Service System, and (6) Identify and validate successful rural programs and set up a diffusion network for getting information out to the users of these programs.

Last Tuesday's election will definitely have its affect on the policies of the current administration. Therefore, it behooves us all to make sure that during the transition which takes place between administrations, that we actively seek support for the rural initiatives that have been started so that they will be continued under the new administration. In light of the strong belief in local control that President-elect Reagan stated throughout his campaign, I see no reason for him to alter the basic philosophy that is predicated in President Carter's Small Community and Rural Development Policy.

When I stood up and began speaking, I said I would limit my remarks to twenty minutes. As I look at my watch, I see that I'm quickly approaching that 20 minute limit. But, before I sit down, shut up, and let you out for your restroom break, I would like to conclude my remarks by saying this. As I was getting ready to leave home for my trip to Kansas, I took my six-year-old daughter, Danielle, aside and asked her whose real responsibility it was to make rural schools better. "Why Daddy," she said, "it's the responsibility of all of us to make rural schools better." Therein lies the truth in our quest for better rural schools.

State Constitutions place in the hands of legislatures the primary responsibility to see that all children in their states are provided free access to public education. In turn, legislatures have traditionally passed on much of this responsibility to their locally elected boards of education. Because of recent court decisions concerning inequitable collections and distributions of education aid, many states have reformed their school finance laws. In this process of reform, many states have assumed a greater share of the cost of education. Unfortunately, when they increased their share in the cost of education, they also increase their control over local school decisions -- for he that controls the purse strings also lays claim for control of decisions. What we are finding is that many school finance reforms failed to address the specific needs of rural and small schools because legislatures have tried to develop simplistic answers to the complex problems of school finance. Finance laws, if they are to meet the needs of both rural and urban communities, must be flexible enough to allow communities to develop and support educational programs that are best suited to their local circumstances. Until the problems associated with school finance are corrected, the quest for better schools will be severely limited. The role of the federal government is to provide appropriate assistance when and where it is necessary. Once the corrections are made in state and federal funding formulas, rural schools will be in a much better position to work toward rural school improvements. On the bottom line of the quest for better schools are those people who are most directly affected by them in their daily lives -- the students who attend them, the parents who support them, the teachers who teach in them, and the administrators who are responsible for running them. We are the people who will have the final say in whether or not rural schools get better or worse. I, for one, do not feel rural schools have failed. In fact, I am amazed that they have survived the past neglect and abuses that they have received from state and federal government, institutions of higher education, and the education profession itself.

In light of the many positive things that have been happening over the past two or three years, I have no doubts that a bright future exists for rural and small schools. As the rural and small school coalition continues to grow, it is important that those of us who are most interested in their future see to it that the renewed attention that is being given to our problems and concerns does not quickly become a thing of the past. Because rural people are indeed creative, persistent and dedicated Americans, I don't anticipate that any of us living in rural America are going to allow that to happen.

Thank you for inviting me back to Kansas.